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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1980s researchers have increasingly turned to family systems theory and stress and coping theory to conceptualize the relationship between parental adjustment and children's adaptive process. The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of maternal coping strategies upon the adaptive processes of children. That is, how children's behavior varies as a function of their mother's coping efforts is examined. The overall sample consisted of 112 women with elementary school age children. Half of the sample of mother-child dyads were from married families and the remainder of mother-child dyads were from single parent families (whereby mothers had sole custody). The findings suggest that mothers' coping efforts characterized by escape-avoidant and social support-seeking behaviors were more likely to be associated with children's behavior problems, especially in divorced families. One plausible explanation for this may be that family members from the two distinct configurations face unique stressors in terms of kind and magnitude, with disrupted families facing comparatively greater challenges. (Author/BF)

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Relationships Between Maternal Coping Efforts and Children's Adaptive Processes in Divorced and Intact Families

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Relationships Between Maternal Coping Efforts and Children's Adaptive Processes in Divorced and Intact Families

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of maternal coping strategies upon the adaptive processes of children. That is, how children's behavior varies as a function of their mothers' coping efforts is examined. The overall sample consisted of 112 women with elementary school age children. Half of the sample of mother-child dyads were from married families and the remainder of mother-child dyads were from single parent families (whereby mothers had sole residential custody). The findings suggest that mothers' coping efforts characterized by escape-avoidant and social support seeking behaviors were more likely to be associated with children's behavior problems, especially in divorced families.

Relationships Between Maternal Coping Efforts and Children's Adaptive Processes in Divorced and Intact Families

Since the early 1980s researchers have increasingly turned to family systems theory (Minuchin, 1985) and stress and coping theory (Lazarus, 1991) to conceptualize the relationship between parental adjustment children's adaptive processes. In fact, the construct of parental stress has been proposed (Abidin, 1990; Forehand et al., 1990; Webster-Stratton, 1990) to explain how extra and intrafamilial stresses may lead to poor parental adjustment, which in turn influences parental perceptions and child-rearing practices. A cycle is set in motion whereby ineffective coping mechanisms have a negative impact on the caretaker-child relationship, which in turn enhance the child's risk of maladaptation.

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of maternal coping strategies upon the adaptive processes of children. That is, how children's behavior varies as a function of their mothers' coping efforts is examined. Although the lack of research precludes a directional hypothesis, a relationship is intuitively expected.

Method

Subjects

The overall sample consisted of 112 women with elementary school age children. Half of the sample of women were married (I=intact) and the remainder of women headed single parent families (D=divorced, M=3.15 years, SD=2.7). All Women in the D group had sole residential custody

of their children and visitation by the father was abundant in both frequency and duration of noncustodial contacts. The overall sample of children was evenly distributed in sex and grade.

Measures

Child Behavior Checklist [CBCL] (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). The CBCL is a 118 item parent report that can be used for children aged four to 16, and uses a three point scale to assess parental perceptions of children's social competence and maladaptive behaviors. Total scores, which control for gender and age differences in behavior problems, are used as an index of maternal reports of their children's maladaptive coping behavior (on a global level).

Ways of Coping Questionnaire [WCQ] (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). The WCQ is a 66 item inventory that functions as a process measure of coping efforts on a Likert-type scale. It elicits information about the range of coping efforts adults use to deal with a particular stressful event. It is comprised of eight subscales consisting of emotion-focused and problem-focused items. The WCQ was used to assess maternal coping efforts.

Family Background Survey [FBS] (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993). The survey was employed with the aim of gathering detailed demographic data on family members.

Procedure

The sample was obtained by sending elementary school children in grades three to six home with consent forms. Upon consent, mothers completed the scales.

Results

The data were analyzed in general and with respect to the two distinct family configurations being examined. A multiple regression model was employed, with children's global coping efforts (CBCL) entered as dependent variables. All eight WCQ subscales, measuring maternal coping efforts, were entered into the regression model as a set independent variables. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Treating the D and I group as an aggregate sample, the set of independent variables representing maternal coping efforts were found to be significant [$F(8,103)=3.68$, $p<.001$], with individual F-tests suggesting a predictive relationship between escape-avoidance and social support seeking coping strategies in mothers, and children's global coping efforts of a maladaptive nature.

Similarly, for the D group, the set of independent variables representing maternal coping efforts (measured by the WCQ) were found to be significant [$F(8,47)=2.13$, $p<.05$]. The individual F-tests demonstrated a predictive relationship between escape-avoidance and social support seeking coping strategies in mothers with sole residential custody of children and children's global estimates of coping efforts (i.e., problem behavior). The nature of the relationship for social support

seeking strategies and children's global maladaptive coping efforts was negative; whereas the relationship between escape-avoidance strategies and children's global maladaptive coping efforts was positive. The analyses were then repeated entering only the social support seeking and escape-avoidance WCQ subscales as a set, and this set of independent variables was found to be significant as well [$F(2,53)=6.96$, $p<.01$]. Individual F-tests indicated that both subscales were significant in predicting children's global maladaptive coping efforts, with maternal escape-avoidance strategies contributing most to the model. These results were not observed for the I group.

Discussion

The results support the notion that children's maladaptive coping efforts on a global level vary as a function of maternal coping efforts. Regardless of family configuration, mothers' coping efforts characterized by escape-avoidant and social support seeking behaviors were found to be associated with children's coping processes on a global level. Within this predictive relationship, social support seeking strategies exhibited by women were negatively correlated with their children's maladaptive behaviors. Conversely, the utilization of escape-avoidant coping strategies by mothers was observed to increase the probability of children's maladaptive behaviors.

When the data were analyzed by family configuration, it was surprising that this relationship was not observed in intact families. That is, as with the results of the aggregate sample, escape-avoidance and

social support seeking coping strategies were found to be associated with problem behavior in children of divorced mothers with sole residential custody. One plausible explanation may be that family members from the two distinct configurations face unique stressors in terms of kind and magnitude, with disrupted families facing comparatively greater challenges. In previous studies, the custodial parent-child relationship has been found to have a strong influence upon children's development, even more so than in intact families (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1988). Alternatively, since the significant results indicating a relationship between parents' and children's coping processes were from one data source, perhaps the findings reflect a relationship between maternal coping efforts and their perceptions of children's behavior. However, this explanation appears implausible and unreasonable given that no significant relationships emerged even though parents from intact homes completed the same measures. Moreover, studies have shown that parental assessments of children's behaviors correspond to other sources of information about children's behaviors (e.g., Shaughency & Lahey, 1985). Thus, it is likely that the stress incurred during the postdivorce process allows a more in-depth examination of women's relationships with their children, especially in the case of custodial parent-child associations.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the pertinent variables across both groups.

Variable	**Divorced** (n=56) Mean	S.D.	**Intact** (n=56) Mean	S.D.
CBCL Total	38.43	24.19	25.07	16.72
WCQ Total	69.25	21.71	67.58	25.98
WCQ Confrontive	6.46	3.32	6.00	3.33
WCQ Self-Control	8.63	3.74	8.49	3.73
WCQ Distancing	4.95	3.23	5.14	5.59
WCQ Soc. Support	7.90	4.81	8.31	4.13
WCQ Accept.Resp.	3.68	2.37	3.71	2.82
WCQ Escape Avoid.	4.83	4.00	4.63	3.91
WCQ Plan. Prob. Sol.	8.21	3.74	8.71	4.33
WCQ Ps. Reappraisal	8.61	4.77	7.63	4.49

Note:
CBCL = Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983): Total scores
WCQ = Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988): Confrontive Coping; Self-Controlling; Distancing; Seeking Social Support; Accepting Responsibility; Escape-Avoidance; Planful Problem Solving; and Positive Reappraisal subscales